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ORGANATIONAL
Research Council

Spies in Canada's research council

from David Spurgeon, Ottawa

MANY Canadians, including scientists and Members of Parliament, were startled in January by the allegation contained in a television broadcast that their country's National Research Council (NRC) has for many years been serving as a cover for secret intelligence gathering.

Although the NRC unit involved—the Communications Branch—has been in existence since 1940, few Ottawa officials seemed to be aware of its existence or its mission. The director-general of information services in the Department of National Defence—a brigadier-general who has served with the department for some 30 years—told an inquirer that before the television program he had never heard of it.

Those who do know of its mission have been sworn to secrecy. Its director, N. K. O'Neill, refused to give a reporter information on its budget and staff, or indeed to comment on anything concerning it. When asked to whom he reported, he replied that he had been spending all that morning trying to find out. Questioners seeking information from the NRC were directed to the Prime Minister's office (where a spokesman simply quoted from Mr. Trudeau's comments on January 11 in the House of Commons. The Prime Minister acknowledged that Canada "has always collected what information was available to it in its territory", but said it had never to his knowledge "engaged in any espionage abroad in the sense that we have not been looking for information in an undercover way in any other country". And he would not confirm the allegations made in the television program.

The program, aired by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (a Crown corporation funded by the federal government), claimed the NRC branch works hand-in-hand with the United States Central Intelligence Agency through the CIA's representative at the United States embassy in Ottawa.

It monitors and records radio traffic received through listening posts in the Arctic and elsewhere, and analyzes this and other intelligence gathered by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and the armed forces. Encoded messages sent from foreign embassies in the Canadian capital are also monitored. The results of this work are shared with allies such as the United States and Britain.

Regardless of the accuracy of the details, it is apparent that the NRC's

Communications Branch is in fact engaged in highly secret work of a nature more usually associated with defence or security agencies than with national research laboratories. Inquiries reveal that the branch came into existence during the second world war, when the NRC seemed the obvious place to go for help because of its scientists' expertise and contacts.

What seems strange is that the work was not moved after the war, either to the Defence Department or the newly-formed Defence Research Board. One reason seems to be that NRC simply provided too good a cover, and since moving the branch would only draw attention to it, those responsible felt it best to leave it where it was. It also seems strange that the matter has never before been raised publicly, because the branch is situated in its own building surrounded by a high wire fence in plain view in southwest Ottawa (albeit far removed from other NRC buildings), and is listed in the government telephone directory.

Now that the branch has surfaced, its work is clearly an embarrassment to the NRC. Those in a position to know say attempts have been made by NRC for years to get rid of it. They also say NRC has contributed nothing to its policy, and that the president and council know little or nothing about it.

The importance of the affair for Canadian scientists is the effect it could have abroad on the image of the country's national laboratories. The NRC has been one of Canada's chief instruments of international science policy and

its representative on many international scientific agencies. To be tarred with the CIA's brush will not help its reputation.

There are national implications too. As Douglas Fisher, former Member of Parliament and newspaper columnist put it in the *Toronto Sun*: "Highly placed people noting Watergate's excesses, get concerned. Could the Communications Branch, NRC, get out of hand? . . . its expenditures and work are never openly questioned or examined".

The questions raised by the television program may, however, lead to changes. David Lewis, leader of the New Democratic Party, which has held the balance of power in the minority government, asked in the Commons: "In view of the fact that the NRC obviously is not the appropriate agency for such an operation . . . may I ask the Prime Minister whether the government would consider taking (it) out . . . and placing it in a more appropriate department. . . ?" To which Mr. Trudeau replied that he would consider the suggestion.

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